DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 511 CG 012 719

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TITLE Selection Practices in American High Schools.
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Toronto, Ontario, CANADA, March, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Aspiration; *Admission Criteria; *Class Average; *College Bound Students; Competitive Selection; Continuous Progress Plan; Grades (Scholastic); *Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Guidance Functions; Research Projects; Secondary Education; Seniors; Student Attitudes; *Student Placement
IDENTIFIERS *Class Rank; *National Longitudinal Study High School Class 1972

ABSTRACT

This paper studies two kinds of selection practices in schools, curriculum tracking and class ranking. Using multiple regression analyses of the National Longitudinal Survey (NLS), this paper finds that tracking and class ranks have important effects on whether students can attend college. However, it also finds that many students misperceive their tracks and they do not adequately take account of their track placements and class ranks in formulating their college plans. Consequently, many students' college expectations--even in senior year--are unrealistic and go unfulfilled after graduation. These findings clearly indicate the need for schools to inform students better about these selection practices and their implications for students' future educational attainments. (Author)

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ED159511

Selection Practices in American High Schools

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Paper to be presented at the annual meetings
of AERA, Toronto, March, 1978, Session 18.17.

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This paper studies two kinds of selection practices in schools, curriculum tracking and class ranking. Using multiple regression analyses of the National Longitudinal Survey (NCES), this paper finds that tracking and class ranks have important effects on whether students can attend college. However, it also finds that many students misperceive their tracks and they do not adequately take account of their track placements and class ranks in formulating their college plans. Consequently, many students' college expectations--even in senior year--are unrealistic and go unfulfilled after graduation. These findings clearly indicate the need for schools to inform students better about these selection practices and their implications for students' future educational attainments.

CG 012719

"Selection Practices in American High Schools"

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Researchers have extensively investigated the effects of schools, and they find much greater variance in educational attainment within schools than among different schools (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972). This suggests the importance of studying selection systems within schools. The present paper focusses on two kinds of selection practices in schools, curriculum tracking and class ranking.

Recent sociological literature contains a vast body of research which comes out of Sewell's model of the "status-attainment process" (recently summarized in Sewell and Hauser, 1975). Tracking has been considered in such a model, but with conflicting results. Heyns (1974) found that tracking is not highly influenced by social class after controlling for students' ability; Hauser, Sewell, and Alwin (1976) found that grades were far more important than tracking on students' college plans; but Alexander and McDill's (1976) findings contradict both studies. However, all three studies are seriously hampered by the lack of a good indicator of students' track placements.[1] The present study investigates the antecedents and consequences of tracking when it is properly measured by taking it from official school records. It also finds that students' track perceptions often diverge from reality, and it investigates the effects of track misperceptions.

Class ranking has been studied in most of these studies, but it has generally been assumed to be identical to grades. However, two surveys have shown that grade-weighting systems are often used to create class rankings (Merz, 1961; Doughty, 1970), and a case study has shown that class ranks have greater influence than grades on students' college attendance (Rosenbaum, 1976). The present study investigates whether this is more generally true in other schools and whether students take account of this effect in the formation of their college plans.

The discrepancy between students' college plans and their attainments is a particular focus of this paper. Although the present study finds that expectations are generally realistic, it finds that a large number of seniors have college plans that are not fulfilled in the three years after graduation. The present inquiry investigates to what extent school selection practices such as tracking and class ranking may contribute to the lack of fulfillment of these students' plans.

Data and Methods

This study reports analyses I have conducted from the National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Class of 1972, sponsored by the National Center for Educational Statistics (USOE). A two-stage probability sample was employed in constructing the NLS, first sampling schools and then sampling students within each school. The initial-year questionnaire and test battery were administered by Educational Testing Service in the Spring of 1972 to 16,683 seniors enrolled in 1,070 public, private, and church-affiliated secondary schools within the fifty states and D.C., oversampling to obtain adequate representation of minority students. Follow-up surveys were administered to these students in the fall of 1973 and 1974.

Aside from the magnitude of this data, the study is unusual in the information it obtained from students' school records. Among the school-record indicators used in this present paper are students' track placements, grades, and class ranks. As noted, there are reasons to believe that students' perceptions of their track placements are sometimes incorrect, that grades and class ranks are not identical, and that these distinctions may have important consequences. Therefore, the present data present an unusual opportunity to test these hypotheses.

This study uses multiple regression analysis in a single recursive model, and it employs the strategy of successive equation estimation suggested by Alwin and Hauser (1975). By means of successive computations of reduced-form equations, this method permits the analysis to decompose effects into their various direct and

indirect parts. The procedure permits a straightforward method of addressing the question of the direct effects of selection practices on students' college attendance, independent of their college plans.[2]

Results

In contrast with what has sometimes been assumed, this analysis finds that class ranks are not merely based on students' grades. The two are highly--but not perfectly--correlated (.82). Moreover, a multiple regression analysis on class ranks on grades and other factors finds that grades are systematically weighted in producing class ranks, so that students who are females, who are in college tracks, or who have high ability receive higher class ranks for their grades (see table 1). The most likely interpretation of this result is not that sex and ability per se influence class ranks, but rather that grades are given different weights depending on the supposed "difficulty" of the course. Two surveys have shown that class ranks are often computed by various weighting schemes (Merz, 1961; Doughty, 1970), and one study has described the grade-weighting system in a single school and shown its implications for keeping noncollege-track students out of the upper half of class ranks (Rosenbaum, 1976). However, this is the first large-scale study to show the extent of grade-weighting and to show the kinds of students who benefit from it.

Of course, grade-weighting in itself may not be bad. It may be justified on the grounds that some courses are more difficult than others and consequently that it is harder to get good grades in these courses. This rationale is generally based on the assumption that grades have the same distribution in different tracks and different ability groups. However, this study finds that grades do not have the same distribution in different tracks, but rather the college-track grade distribution is much higher than that of the noncollege track. From these findings, it seems possible that college-track teachers are already compensating students for the greater difficulty in these classes, and it suggests that grade-weighting to create class ranks may create an overcompensation. Obviously, whether this

speculation is true requires more detailed analysis, but the present findings are the first to provide evidence about the systematic distortions created by grade-weighting and their widespread effects.

The discrepancy between grades and class ranks is not a trivial matter as the analysis of their consequences shows. When each is added into multiple regressions on college attendance (including sex, race, social class, aptitude, and track in the equation as controls), the analysis finds that class ranks have greater influence than students' grades on whether students attend college (tables 2 and 3). Moreover, the analysis reveals that class ranks even influence college attendance, independent of students' college plans. In other words, class ranks may be acting to frustrate students' plans to attend college in ways that they had not anticipated. Schools do not make class ranks as visible as they make grades, but they do send these ranks on to colleges. Class ranks are having the greater influence on whether students can attend college, and they are one reason why some students' college plans are not realized.

Tracking is a second reason. Most of the sociological research on tracking has never detected this, for most of that research has used students' track perceptions as their only indicator of tracking. Jencks et al (1972) suspected that misperception might be happening, and Rosenbaum (1976) has shown it to be true in a case study, but the present study is the first large-scale survey to document the extent of track misperception. Our analyses of the NLS data show a correlation between track and perceived track of .60, surely a large correlation, but one that indicates a great deal of misperception.

Using multiple regression analysis, this analysis suggests that tracking may be contributing to students' disappointed college plans. The analyses indicate that students' actual track placements not only have a large influence on students' college plans, but they also have an additional direct influence on students' college attendance, independent of students' plans (table 3). This suggests that

tracking plays a significant role in preventing some students who were planning to attend college from being able to do so.

This is not the case for students' track perceptions. Comparing the influence of students' perceptions of their track placements with the influence of their actual track placements, we see that students' track perceptions do not explain much of the discrepancy between students' plans and their college attendance (table 4). Apparently, students' perceptions are not only incorrect in many cases, but they are distorted in a way which makes students less aware of tracking's influence on college attendance.

Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) and Heyns (1974) have suggested that noncollege-track students receive less attention from guidance counselors than do college-track students. The present study extends those findings. It finds that many students misperceive their track and many students are not aware of the impact of tracking and class ranks. Many students do not adequately take account of their track placements and class ranks in formulating their college plans, and consequently, their plans are unrealistic and go unfulfilled.

Educational Implications

Much of the sociological research on the determinants of college attendance has looked at factors which schools cannot easily change: sex, race, social class, ability, and peers. The present analysis introduces two additional factors which are directly related to school policy: class ranks and tracking. This study shows the influence of each of these on college plans and college attendance, and it suggests that students do not sufficiently realize the importance of these factors.

The findings of this study indicate that schools must either endeavor to diminish the influence of these selection practices or else they must make greater efforts to help students make realistic plans based upon them. In a democratic society, selection is an unpleasant fact, one that perhaps should be reformed, and

one that school staff, like all of us, must find difficult to discuss with students whose chances are not good. However, until it is changed, and as long as schools are creating some of the indicators which influence these selections, schools will bear a special responsibility to inform students how these selections are being made and what implications these selections are likely to have. Many schools may be making efforts in this area at present; however, this matter is as difficult as it is important, and the present study, like those of Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963), Heyns (1974), and Rosenbaum (1976), indicates that more needs to be done. At the very least, these findings suggest that schools need to make greater attempts to inform all students about what tracks they are in, what class ranks they are receiving, and what the implications may be for their future educational attainments.

Footnotes

1. Heyns (1974) and Alexander and McDill (1976) used students' reports of their tracks, and Hauser and his colleagues (1976) inferred students' tracks from students' courses. My own case study (Rosenbaum, 1976) cautions against trusting either of these measures. My research found that students often do not know what track they are in. It also found that students in different tracks often take courses with identical titles, although the subject matter covered might be quite different for the college track and general track versions of the course.

2. This paper is part of a larger analysis which will be reported in a paper titled "Labelling Mechanisms in Schools." The latter paper reports the technical details and results more fully.

Table 1: Regression on Class Rank Which Includes Grades

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables						R^2
	SES	Aptitude	Race	Sex	Track	Grades	
Rank	-.013*	.199	-.049	.107	.100	.681	.742

Table 2: Structural Model of Track-Grades Effects[1]

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables: SES	Aptitude	Race	Sex	Track	Grades	Plans	R^2
Track	.220	.443	-.040	.005*				.301
Grades	-.018*	.492	.013*	.137				.273
Grades	-.031	.393	.022*	.136	.223			.307
Plans	.278	.343	-.145	-.067				.244
Plans	.194	.174	-.130	-.069	.381			.346
Plans	.197	.126	-.133	-.085	.354	.121		.356
Attend	.297	.343	-.110	-.057				.259
Attend	.220	.189	-.096	-.059	.347			.343
Attend	.223	.147	-.098	-.073	.323	.107		.351
Attend	.116	.079	-.026*	-.027*	.131	.042	.542	.540

[1]Asterisks indicate coefficients less than twice their standard error. Standardized coefficients are reported.

Table 3: Structural Model of Track-Rank Effects[1]

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables: SES	Aptitude	Race	Sex	Track	Rank	Plans	R^2
Track	.220	.443	-.040	.005*				.301
Rank	-.021*	.578	-.044	.201				.378
Rank	-.034	.467	-.034	.200	.251			.422
Plans	.278	.343	-.145	-.067				.244
Plans	.194	.174	-.130	-.069	.381			.346
Plans	.199	.103	-.125	-.099	.343	.151		.359
Attend	.297	.343	-.110	-.057				.259
Attend	.220	.189	-.096	-.059	.347			.343
Attend	.225	.119	-.091	-.089	.309	.151		.356
Attend	.118	.063	-.023*	-.036	.125	.070	.538	.542

[1] Asterisks indicate coefficients less than twice their standard error. Standardized coefficients are reported.

Table 4: Structural Model of Perception-Rank Effects[1]

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables: SES	Aptitude	Race	Sex	Track Perc.	Rank	Plans	R^2
Track Perc.	.242	.353	-.044	-.045				.233
Rank	-.021*	.578	-.044	.201				.378
Rank	-.027*	.508	-.036	.210	.198			.408
Plans	.278	.343	-.145	-.067				.244
Plans	.194	.221	-.139	-.052	.346			.336
Plans	.199	.133	-.124	-.088	.312	.172		.353
Attend	.297	.343	-.110	-.057				.259
Attend	.229	.244	-.097	-.044	.281			.319
Attend	.234	.153	-.091	-.082	.246	.178		.338
Attend	.123	.079	-.022*	-.033	.073	.083	.554	.537

[1]Asterisks indicate coefficients less than twice their standard error. Standardized coefficients are reported.

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